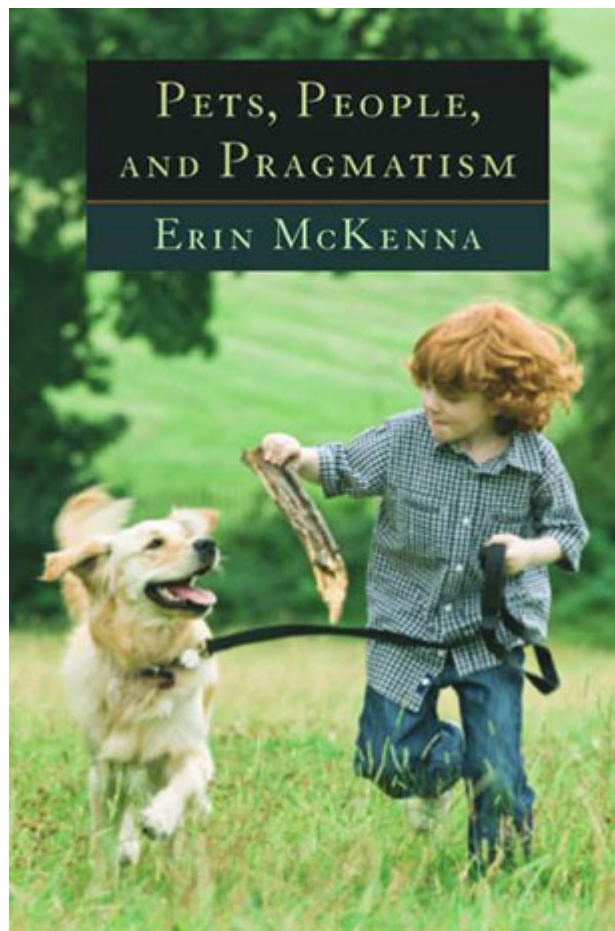


Reviews

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Uncommon Horse Sense

Erin McKenna. *Pets, People, and Pragmatism*. New York: Fordham UP, 2013. ix + 247 pp. \$85 hc, \$26 pb.



In *Pets, People, and Pragmatism*, Erin McKenna offers a useful approach to ethical choices involving beings we call “pets.” Extending insights from classical pragmatism, she proposes ways to improve lives in situations in which absolutist principles don’t deliver. In the process, she unearths subtly anthropocentric assumptions in leading theories for understanding human-nonhuman animal relations. At heart, the book poses the question: can there be “morally satisfactory relationships with horses, dogs,

and cats that include some level of confinement, training, and control” (2). Her affirmative response reveals the need for a pragmatist intervention in the current conversation, provides fascinating accounts of the histories and conditions of these species, and grounds her most abstract points in poignant experiences with close animal companions.

The book devotes one chapter to each species, leading with horses. I found this longest, most detailed section especially compelling, partly because of the death of a relative’s filly in the Kentucky Derby. At post-time 2008, I sat at my television for “the best two minutes in sports,” as Eight Belles pulled out against the colts to place second. I didn’t see that, seconds after passing the wire, she collapsed with two broken ankles and was euthanized on the track. “We didn’t feel we could show it,” NBC told the *New York Times*. “We didn’t want to show her suffering.”

Pets, People, and Pragmatism doesn’t shrink from showing suffering. In often gruesome detail, McKenna describes the rampant abuse and neglect in racing and other human-nonhuman animal activities. She tackles the so-called “retirement” (i.e. slaughter) of horses who cannot compete, as well as the dangers of selective breeding which often produces “horses with very fine bones that cannot hold up to athletic demands” (52). From a pragmatist perspective, however, the aim isn’t to end racing, but to improve conditions. Given their “natural and developmental history,” she contends, “there are horse beings who want to perform, who want to run” (76). Eight Belles did, though as the *Washington Post* reported, she “ran with the heart of a locomotive, on champagne-glass ankles.” For McKenna, enhancing life for domestic animal beings calls for understanding on the level of species and breed, as well as individual personality. Rich in remarkable details, her book promises to help horses, dogs, and cats by illuminating relevant facets of our shared histories and current interactions.

McKenna’s strain of pragmatism stems from Peirce, James, and Dewey. As she explains, it’s pluralist (eschewing universalist claims), developmental (seeing the world always in process), experimental (seeking hypotheses not final solutions), fallible (open to correction and revision), and ameliorative (making things better). Upfront about her forefathers’ prejudices concerning nonhuman animals, she uses pragmatism’s own premises to rescue its relevance: its self-correcting experimentalism justifies extension into post-humanist thought. She also incorporates strands of early pragmatic feminism

via Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jane Addams, ecofeminism mainly through Val Plumwood, and cultural relativism by way of Alain Locke. The mix includes a bit of what she broadly calls “continental thought” via Donna Haraway and Kelly Oliver, though she complains (without much explanation) of their putting “language and concepts in front of actual relations” (22). Through this pluralist mingling, McKenna advances “a new approach, not just an extension of moral theories” and develops “a Pragmatist feminist account of the possibilities for relationships between human beings and other animal beings that will help us all re-think how we live together” (24).

McKenna clears space for her account by exposing limitations of existing theories, including utilitarian concern for suffering (Singer), deontological calls for rights (Regan), and virtue ethics’ focus on flourishing (Nussbaum). Hatched before Darwin’s idea of evolution, these approaches “often smuggle in remnants of the view of humans as separate from the rest of nature” (22). Thus, while overtly rejecting anthropocentrism, they subtly reinforce human qualities as the measure of subjectivity. Singer, she points out, puts humans on the top of his scale of interests, while Nussbaum privileges human self-consciousness in her list of capabilities. And though Regan famously declares “traditional anthropocentrism is dead,” he goes on to name “traits that have given humans special status to measure which animals are ‘subjects of life’” (23). Somewhat dismissively, she includes Haraway and Oliver in this company because they “contest the divide, but still end up focusing on characteristics like language and consciousness” (230). All these approaches, McKenna contends, extend humanist ethics to other animal beings and thereby perpetuate the idea of human dominance within a human/animal hierarchy.

Pets, People, and Pragmatism offers an exceptional challenge to human exceptionalism, even as it assimilates insights from these other approaches. Disrupting outdated metaphysical and ontological assumptions lurking within nonhuman-animal ethics, McKenna considers nature and culture, not as binaries, but as always already intertwined. “Humans,” she avers, “have always been in relations with animal others and we have influenced each other’s development along the way” (219). Ever-evolving, our “culture” (including language) occurs within “nature,” so “when we try to deny our past or continued interconnectedness ... we try to mute the animal in pets and the animal in humans” (34). For pragmatists, nothing exists outside of context, including their own theories.

Not surprisingly, therefore, pragmatism informs not only the book’s content but its style: unaffected prose, anecdotal interludes (complete with pictures of personal pets),

and unconventional structure. Rather than introducing abstract concepts in isolation, McKenna first demonstrates their efficacy with horses. Her most direct engagement with theory, in a middle section called “American Pragmatism: The Continuity of Critters,” is already grounded in experience, to which she returns in her equally informative chapters on dogs and cats. All chapters contain sections on abuse and neglect, research and biomedical contexts, use in entertainment, competition and work, and death. In each, she offers original solutions to problems exacerbated by other approaches. As she explains, “The debates among animal advocates, and between animal advocates and others interested in relationships with other animal beings, have not generally been guided by informed contextual thinking. Instead, principles have been applied in absolute and universal ways” (6). For instance, she reveals that more horses were reported starving or abandoned during the 2007 U.S. ban on horse slaughter than either before or after. Others lived with painful injuries, and many “simply had to endure longer transport to slaughter facilities in Canada and Mexico” (60). This is just one startling example of how well-meaning advocates pursued principles that, ironically, hurt the very beings they sought to help. Indeed, she claims, universal approaches to ethics regularly overlook “the tensions, contradictions, and problems caused by the proposed ‘solution’” (60).

Particularly harmful, she argues, are activists seeking to liberate nonhuman animals from their status as property and, worse, utopians hoping to abolish domestication altogether. Such stances oversimplify and “tend to push people to extreme and often contradictory positions.... This makes work for real change in the relationships among humans and other animal beings difficult” (5-6). One polarizing example is PETA’s contention that “no breeding can be considered ‘responsible’” (3) which, she claims, has led conscientious canine and feline breeders to suspect all animal welfare groups and, hence, resist regulations by moderate organizations like the HSUS. Pragmatism would sooner search for areas of common ground and create coalitions that could, for example, reduce puppy mills. Though groups would remain “opposed to each other on a number of key concerns,” pragmatic pluralism “could make possible many cooperative ventures that would directly benefit other animal beings” (225). Thus, while McKenna’s critique involves metaphysics, ontology, and (less explicitly) epistemology, her thrust remains ethical. Instead of implementing rules, she believes, “ethicists can help people work across their differences for the good of other animal beings” (218). The philosopher, in her eyes, is most exalted as a kind of conflict-mediator whose task “is not to provide the

answer or *the* theory, but to help all involved explain and consider a variety of options in an open, tolerant, and respectful manner” (228). Only through these means can philosophy effect real amelioration.

More ardent non-interference approaches, McKenna argues, simultaneously block change and reinstate human/animal binaries by inscribing humans as ontologically different. If we frame domestication as intervening in nature, she warns, “we often unconsciously presuppose human transcendence over nature” (27). Ironically, this stance is “often shared by animal rights/welfare people as well as by those who support the idea that the rest of nature exists simply for humans to use it in any way they see fit — a dominance and use view. Both positions rest on a belief in human exceptionalism, though with different outcomes” (2). From a pragmatist view of continuity over species isolation, however, “domestication is a natural event and condition” rather than an example of domination, “a two-way street” in which we continually co-constitute one another (19). Thus, though she outlines competing theories of domestication, creating a singular narrative is beside her point. Instead, she opens each chapter with a chronicle (and helpful diagram) of that pet’s history as a species.

By invoking the controversial term “pet,” McKenna distinguishes herself from radical rights advocates like Regan and Francione, who want to end domestication, as well as from thinkers, like ecologist Paul Shephard, who relegate pets to a monstrously liminal status, between animal and human, as unnatural beings who “substitute for human companionship or for replacing our lost connection to the ‘wild’” (24). Such views are anathema to pragmatism, in which relationships remain transactional and inequality does not, necessarily, entail domination or exploitation. Positing pets as mere objects of use replicates the very binary that privileges humans; yet, among most animal advocates, the term “is assumed to be demeaning and to imply ownership and dependence, and to anthropomorphize the other animal beings.” Taken to an extreme, anthropomorphism leads to projecting human qualities. Without it, though, animals become entirely other, “lacking intelligence, emotions, and interests” (9). “Both views—unreflective relations of use and making other animal beings seem human—enable us to see animal beings, pets in particular, as being here primarily for our pleasure,” which leads to mistreatment (34). Because either extreme can result in abandonment and abuse of pets, she advocates limited anthropomorphism, a compromise between rejection (absolute difference) and overindulgence (complete identity).

McKenna uses the exceptional status of pets to justify the need for her book. Still, as she hints in her introduction and elaborates in her conclusion, *Pets, People, and Pragmatism* is

the start of a larger project. By reflecting on how we see pets, she establishes a new framework for beings considered wild, on the one hand, and commodities of use, on the other. As she puts it, “understanding these pet relationships differently will have implications for our relationships with other domesticated animal beings as well as other non-domesticated species” (20). Her biggest goal is to kindle a shift in the way we think. This shift “will have ramifications for what is seen as morally acceptable but it won’t always result in full agreement or clear and certain policies. Instead it will suggest an approach to understanding and improving these relationships that is rooted in humility, caution, and respect” (224).

McKenna cautiously expects that working toward common ground with businesses involving animals will improve nonhuman lives. I’d like to believe her. Still, shifting attitudes can be painfully incremental. Eight Belles’s fall provoked national outrage in articles like the *LA Times*’s op-ed “Bred for Death.” There’s since been reform of track surfaces, yet the systemic problem with breeding remains. Though her owner promised, in the *Wall Street Journal*, to support “anything we can do to research how to get a more-durable horse,” he continues to race thoroughbreds, and serious attempts to expand the gene pool find little backing in the industry. Perhaps the book’s unusually appealing cover, with a happy child and smiling golden retriever on leash, will entice those outside the choir and, as maintained on the back, “captivate scholars and pet enthusiasts alike.” (The colorful photograph does stand out among the staid jackets in Fordham’s series on American Philosophy.) Reaching a wider audience would certainly maintain the lineage of Peirce, James, and Dewey — as well as Gilman and Addams — who publically engaged in moral debates, including those over emancipation and civil rights.

The introduction to *Animal Pragmatism: Rethinking Human-Nonhuman Relationships*, which McKenna co-edited with Andrew Light in 2004, advanced pragmatism as a voice “hitherto missing” from animal-welfare conversations, one that “may more deeply challenge our views of our place in the world and thus also more effectively serve to alter current practice” (11). At the time there was “no established spokesperson from the ranks of pragmatists on moral issues involving animals” (4). Though animal pragmatism’s surfaced elsewhere over the past ten years — recently in Tom Tyler’s *ciferae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* — the spokesperson job remains open. *Pets, People, and Pragmatism* establishes Erin McKenna as an impressive candidate.

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